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## Peer Revision: Identifying Attitudes and Perceived Effectiveness in ESL Writing

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### I. Introduction

The use of peer revision in teaching and learning a foreign language has been well documented, and the literature has produced a dearth of positive results, indicating that in all contexts of foreign language acquisition, peer revision is a powerful tool (Saeed, Ghazali and Aljaberi, 2018; Zhao, H., 2018). In regards to L2 writing pedagogy, a ‘process-oriented approach’ that gives students the chance to make multiple drafts and receive peer feedback between those drafts, provides a powerful and unique opportunity for teachers to provide a socio-cognitive form of instruction (Saeed, Ghazali and Aljaberi, 2018). This process-oriented approach to writing further provides the opportunity for students to receive advice from peers within or near their own competency, or Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), as originally defined by Vygotsky (1978, 1986) and the opportunity for students to engage in the important task of reflection on their own writing (Levi Altstaedter, 2016, Lindenman et al., 2018). However, to help accurately predict students’ performance and therefore maximize the above benefits of this approach, it is important to gauge students’ attitudes and level of apprehension about the task (Allen & Mills, 2016).

The following paper is an exploratory study into the perceived effectiveness of trained peer revision in writing classes for 1st and 2nd year Japanese university science majors, with mixed proficiency levels, studying in western Japan. By observing perceived effectiveness over the duration of one semester of trained peer revision, it was hoped that further insight could be gained into the overall effectiveness of the current program. The results given indicated that a significant number of students’

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attitudes to peer revision changed positively over the course of the semester. An increase in effective implementation of the course goals are also presented, further strengthening the argument for peer review to remain as a core component of the current writing course.

## **II. Background**

For most graduate science students in Japan, English is a crucial part of their study; in some cases accounting for over 90 percent of the way in which their research is published and presented (Hamel, R. E., 2008). Within the university involved in the study, around 40 to 50 percent of students typically continue their education into graduate school, meaning that almost the same number of students will be required to have an extremely high competence in English by their 4th year of university. Considering that most students enter the undergraduate course with a TOEIC score of 350-450 points, and are only given two years of mandatory instruction in English, a significant time challenge arises. The students' self-efficacy with regards to English, a remarkably clear correlate for success in second language acquisition, further complicates the situation for teachers (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011; Ehrman, 1996; Kormos et al., 2011). Only 17% of the students involved in this study felt that writing was the strongest of their 'four basic' English skills.

With these factors in mind, it is imperative for instructors to utilize their limited time with students, while maximizing potential opportunities for learning. More specifically in the writing context, teachers are required to utilize their time teaching complex academic writing concepts, while still ensuring students are learning basic concepts of English and producing accurate academic writing. From this perspective, peer revision presents an opportunity for increased learning opportunities for various skills, along with the added benefits of increased social interaction and general communication skills, as pointed out by Hanjani & Li (2014). However without an accurate understanding of the benefits of trained peer revision within a specific group of students, implementation of a general program may be of little help, or even become detrimental to that group, especially if the attitude towards the learning style conflicts with students own perceptions of what successful learning is (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). Hence the following study was produced to identify students' peer revision attitudes and their resulting effectiveness in carrying out a trained, peer revision program.

### **III. Methodology**

#### **1. Portfolios**

A total of 91 students were selected from two first year classes, and two second year classes. At the beginning of the semester, all groups were given portfolio booklets made up of 10 separate writing exercises. The questions were graded according to year level i.e. each year level corresponded to a unique portfolio, and for each of the 10 exercises, students could choose one of several options to write about.

#### **2. Task management**

Students were given 10-15 minutes per class to write in their portfolios. The students were also asked to write outside of class time. Within this 10-15 minute class period, students were also required to seek out a fellow student as reviewer for each of their portfolio exercises, as per the instructions given. It is important to note that each class was given equal opportunity to write during class, and each class was instructed by the same teacher for all classes.

#### **3. Error Identification**

In order to train students how to review their peers' papers effectively, time was set aside every class to teach concepts, practice peer review, and discuss revision strategies as a class. Specifically, students were given a 'key' of different grammatical and lexical errors; a set of errors with an accompanying symbol or letter abbreviation (see Appendix A). These were to be used by the reviewer when correcting errors, thereby avoiding explicit correction and encouraging writer reflection (Lindnenman et. al., 2018). Students peer review activities were limited to identifying syntactic, lexical, and grammar mistakes. (see Appendix A). The potential difficulty of some students in effectively learning the symbols within the given time-frame resulted in the teacher presenting the option of abandoning use of the abbreviations, and simply underlining mistakes whenever the specific error was not known. This would potentially allow students to still point out mistakes within their proficiency level, without being overwhelmed by technical terms, and while still allowing more proficient students to utilize the system to its full potential.

#### **4. Review Process**

Students were all required to complete at least 8 sections of the portfolio over the course of the semester. Within each section, students were required to complete a first and second draft, while having each draft peer reviewed before moving onto the next. Each draft was checked by a different student, resulting in students inter-

acting with 16-20 members of their own class.

## 5. Survey

Both at the mid and final stages of the semester, a survey, comprised of various styles of questions, was administered to all students within the course (see Appendix B). Questions were provided in both Japanese and English, and consisted of multiple choice questions, Likert scale response options, and other open ended questions. The main questions of interest to this study involved investigating student attitudes, ease of understanding, and ease of application of the peer review principles.

## 6. Portfolio Analysis

Students' 4th and 7th portfolio reviews were chosen to gauge any possible changes as the semester progressed. These portfolios were manually checked to obtain figures for average errors found, average errors corrected, and average word count per class. With this data, it was expected that a clear pattern of improvement, or lack of, could be discerned.

# IV. Results

## 1. Initial Observations

From the information provided by the initial survey, only 54 percent of students were observably confident that peer revision was 'somewhat', or 'very' helpful to their studies. By the end of the semester, the overall figure had risen to 67 percent, indicating a clear change in several students' attitudes to the task over time, however this would not turn out to be significant following analysis. As a closed-ended response, initially 54 percent of students felt that their writing had improved, whereas 71 percent believed they had improved by the end of the semester.

## 2. Perceived Utility, Understanding and Ease of Use

To test the hypothesis that the mid semester ( $M = 2.451, 2.385 \text{ \& } 2.418$ ) and end of semester survey results ( $M = 2.187, 2.099 \text{ \& } 2.121$ ) means were equal (helpfulness, understanding and ease of use, respectively), dependent samples t-tests were performed.

For helpfulness  $t(90) = 1.889, p = .062$ , the null hypothesis was not rejected. For ease of understanding,  $t(90) = 2.016, p = .047$ , and ease of use,  $t(90) = 2.261, p = .026$  the null hypothesis could be rejected. These results show that while there was a reduction in mean between the first and second survey for all three questions, the means of 'ease of understanding' and 'ease of use' were significantly lower in the second survey. Cohen's  $d$  was estimated at 0.198, 0.211 and 0.237, which can

Descriptives				
	N	Mean	SD	SE
Student advice helpful: Survey 1	91	2.451	0.847	0.089
Student advice helpful: Survey 2	91	2.187	0.893	0.094
Advice easy to understand: Survey 1	91	2.385	0.866	0.091
Advice easy to understand: Survey 2	91	2.099	0.870	0.091
Easy to use Survey 1	91	2.418	0.804	0.084
Easy to use: Survey 2	91	2.121	0.867	0.091

Paired Samples T-Test						
			t	df	p	Cohen's d
Student advice helpful 1	-	Student advice helpful 2	1.889	90	0.062	0.198
Advice easy to understand 1	-	Advice easy to understand 2	2.016	90	0.047	0.211
Easy to use 1	-	Easy to use 2	2.261	90	0.026	0.237

be seen as a small effect, according to Cohen's own (1992) guidelines.

### 3. Error Correction and word count

As previously stated, both the fourth and seventh survey in the series of portfolios were chosen for analysis, and are herein referred to as portfolios '1' and '2'. Errors found, errors corrected, and average word count between portfolio 1 and 2 were analyzed by dependent t-tests. No significant difference was shown between the means of both surveys, as indicated by the *p values* in the table below.

Paired Samples T-Test for errors, corrections & word count				
		t	df	p
Errors 1	Errors 2	-1.612	3	0.205
corrections 1	Corrections 2	-2.416	3	0.094
Word count 1	Word count 2	-1.048	3	0.372

## V. Discussion

The results of the survey on attitudes indicate several trends. Firstly, there was a significant positive change in students's attitude towards peer review as the semester progressed. In particular, students found the peer review easier to understand as the semester progressed. They also found the advice from peers easier to use as the semester progressed. Despite not being statistically significant, it can be argued that

the proximity to significance signals a trend towards more students also finding the peer revision system helpful to them over time. An upward trend in rates of error identification, error correction, and average word count over the semester, however small, indicates that there has been an improvement in performance over the semester.

Overall, these results indicate that a change has occurred during the semester that has positively influenced the students and helped them improve in their performance. Considering all students were placed under highly similar teaching conditions, it can be posited that as Saeed, Ghazali and Aljaberi (2018) suggest, socio-cognitive factors play a significant role in the effectiveness of peer review.

## VI. Conclusion

It can be concluded from this study that the majority of students are reasonably confident in the effectiveness of peer revision as a writing improvement tool. Further still, students clearly became more confident in their understanding of the task, and confident in applying the knowledge given to them by their peers over the semester. A pattern of improvement in task performance along the attitudinal changes observed indicate trained peer revision in the current model is an effective form of instruction for EFL writing students.

## VII. Future Studies

While gaining a thorough perspective of student attitudes to peer review in EFL writing, this study did not intend to investigate if these attitudes correlated with true increases in writing proficiency. Future studies should naturally seek to correlate the attitudes of students with their actual writing proficiency levels, in terms of micro and macro organization. Also, investigating the role of the teacher inside the socio-cognitive framework, along with other factors that impact student performance and overall writing proficiency, would be of great benefit to educators. By further understanding the unique socio-cognitive, cultural and behavioral factors that influence particular classes, teachers may be able to further foster an environment that better promotes peak self efficacy and EFL literacy for their L2 learners.

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## Appendix A

<b>SYMBOL</b>	<b>MEANING</b>	<b>SYMBOL</b>	<b>MEANING</b>
<b>p</b>	punctuation	<b>wf</b>	wrong form
<b>Λ</b>	missing word	<b>ww</b>	wrong word
<b>cap</b>	capitalization	<b>wo</b>	wrong word order
<b>vt</b>	verb tense	<b>prep</b>	preposition
<b>s/v</b>	subject-verb agreement	<b>art</b>	article
<b>⌋</b>	combine	<b>pron</b>	pronoun agreement
<b>sp</b>	spelling	<b>con</b>	connector
<b>s/pl</b>	singular or plural	<b>rep</b>	repetition
<b>X</b>	unnecessary word	<b>?</b>	I don't understand!

	Indent paragraph		Connect to previous sentence		Start new paragraph
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## Appendix B. Survey on attitudes to peer revision

1. 学生たちのアドバイスが有用でしたか？ Was the advice you got from reviewers helpful?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Yes, very helpful	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	No, not helpful at all

2. アドバイスわかりやすかったですか？ Was the advice easy to understand?

	1	2	3	4	5	
(すごく分かりやすい) Yes, it was very easy to understand	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(すごく分かりにくい) No, it was very difficult to understand

3. アドバイスは使いやすかったですか？ Was the advice easy to use?

	1	2	3	4	5	
(すごく使いやすい) Yes, it was very easy to use	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(すごく使いにくい) No, it was very difficult to use

4. アドバイスを使ったときに訂正をしましたか？何故ですか？ Did you use the advice?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

5. 私に可能な限り最善の助言をする人は I prefer getting advice from

- ☐ 先生 the teacher
- ☐ 学生たち students